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Was It Trine Immersion?

One of the outstanding claims of Dunkerism is the faithfulness with which it has followed the instructions of the Lord Jesus and the practice of the apostolic church in its observance of the ordinances. And the first ordinance with which the new convert is confronted is baptism. But how shall baptism be administered? The new convert usually wants to know, and the church must be ready to give a satisfactory answer, if it has any definite convictions regarding the mode of baptism. Some churches do not have. They claim the mode to be unimportant, and some go so far as to insist that any sort of baptism is a matter of indifference. The baptism of the Spirit is the all-important thing, they say, and whether an individual shall be baptized at all or not, and if so, how, are wholly matters of individual preference. With such churchmen there is little chance for dispute regarding the facts; indeed, they are quite generally agreed with us as to the correctness of the apostolic mode. But they insist that the mode is unimportant. That, of course, is a matter of opinion and not a question of facts. It is needless to say that we do not favor such an attitude. We claim that the form of observing a divine injunction, explicitly set forth, is not a matter of indifference. We agree heartily that the form without the spirit is worthless, but the spirit accompanied by the correctness of form has the advantage of full obedience, which, we believe, brings joy to the heart of the Master and registers in personal character.

But by far the larger portion of mankind that has enlisted under the Christian banner, has considered the mode of baptism important, and by them there has been no little searching and investigation, some, it would seem, to prove that the apostolic mode was in harmony with their ecclesiastical practice, and some to discover more certainly what the Biblical and early church practice really was. Among those who have contributed much to the demonstration and popularization of such knowledge was Alexander Campbell, out of the vigor of whose ministry and teaching a great and worthy denomination has sprung up. But even Alexander Campbell, great as he was, was unable to divest himself entirely of his preconceived notions, so it seems. His investigations must have shown him more than he was ready to accept, more than seemed to fit into his conception of the origin and organization of the church. For in his public debate, with Rev. N. L. Rice in 1843 and over which debate Henry Clay presided, he said, according to the earliest published edition of that debate: "Not only Mosheim and Neander, but all the historians, as well as Professor Stuart, trace trine immersion back to the times of the apostles." Of course his statement was true, but it was more than he intended to prove, for, having been for a time associated and even united with the Baptists, he was doubtless largely influenced by their single mode of baptism. When the above embarrassing statement appeared in print it was promptly corrected to conform to his notion of what the proper mode of baptism should be, and every edition since has appeared properly corrected.

We note that Elder C. C. Grisso recently wrote to the Christian Standard, a paper of the Disciples of Christ, published at Cincinnati, Ohio, asking for their verification of the above quotation. Also a Disciple minister and fellow-pastor with Brother Grisso in Lanark, Illinois, wrote to the same publication for a like purpose. In the published answer the Christian Standard writer stated that their edition of the Campbell and Rice debate published in 1844 and containing a signed statement by Campbell and Rice authenticating that particular edition, "does not contain the word 'trine.'" Then follows this interesting bit of explanation:

"We have heard that in the first copies from the press the word 'trine' appeared in this quotation through error; that when the error was discovered, the word was chiseled out and the space occupied by stars, and the error was later properly corrected when a new plate was made for the page; but we have not been able personally to verify this."

Then our esteemed contemporary's columnist insists that it is not fair to accuse Campbell of having "placed his testimony on the side of trine immersion" when there is nothing to "indicate that he was defending such a position." But we would suggest that it is not difficult to believe that the great debator made the mistake of asserting more fully the historical facts regarding baptism than was really necessary to prove his point, since he, on the same page of the book, in the next paragraph, misinterprets, if our contemporary's quotation is correct, Tertullian's attitude toward baptism, saying that "Tertullian denies that three immersions (not one immersion) had an ancient origin." Here is what he says: "When we are going into the water, a little while before, in the presence of the congregation, and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil and his pomp and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge (the Latin word translated 'pledge' is 'respondentes', response, or promise) than the Lord in his Gospel has appointed." The meaning is, as Dr. C. F. Yoder points out in his "God's Means of Grace" (page 223) that they were making a response or promise of more than was required with regard to renunciation. "It is clear", says Dr. Yoder, "that the 'ampler pledge' was the lengthy consecration vow that came in that day to accompany baptism." That Tertullian's phrase, "making a somewhat ampler pledge" refers definitely to the renunciation statement or vow and not to the baptism, is conclusively shown by a further statement of Tertullian, which we quote: "He commands them to baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, not into a unipersonal God. And indeed, it is not once only but three times, at each name, into each separate person, that we are immersed" (Ad Praxeas, ch. 26). So if Mr. Campbell actually cited Tertullian as opposing trine immersion, he was certainly in error, for the very opposite is true. And further, if this founder of the Disciple church did not originally place his own testimony on the side of trine immersion, it was not because the facts of history would not have warranted such a stand and further back than Tertullian he could have gone in his citations of authority.

FEBRUARY 15, 1930

Yes, it was Trine Immersion

Two weeks ago we discussed in an editorial the question raised by one of our church leaders as to what Alexander Campbell actually said about trine immersion being traced to the times of the apostles. At that time we did not have at hand a copy of the first published edition of the Campbell and Rice debate, but we have since secured the loan of a copy from the Ashland College library. It will be remembered that the contemporary publication referred to in that editorial was unable, upon being requested, to verify the use of the word "trine" in the first published record of that famous debate, though he had "heard" that it had appeared in the first copies "through error" and that "when the error was discovered, the word was chiseled out and the space occupied by stars." That story, however, was credited as a mere rumor or hearsay, and we are quite willing to grant that the chiseling out part was likely never more than a rumor.

But it is no mere rumor that the first printed edition of the debate contained the word "trine." We have the book before us as we write, and here are the exact words of the famous quotation: "Not only Mosheim, Neander, but all the historians (these words are printed in italics in the book), as well as Professor Stuart, trace trine immersion to the times of the apostles" (page 258). Not only so, but on the next page we read the following reference to trine immersion: "In the work of John Floyer on cold bathing, page 50, it is mentioned that the English church practiced immersion down to the beginning of the seventeenth century; when a change to the method of sprinkling gradually took place. As a confirmation of this, it may be mentioned that the first liturgy of 1547 enjoins a trine immersion (here again Mr. Campbell himself uses italics), in case the child is not sickly" (Augusti, *ut sup.* page 229). That the use of the word "trine" in these instances was not a mere accident, or error, nor that, as the hear-say story above referred to suggests, when the error was discovered after a few copies were run, the presses were stopped and the word "trine" chiseled out, is evidenced from the fact that the copy that is now in the Congressional library at Washington, D. C., contains the word "trine." To this fact the late Elder J. B. Wampler bears effective witness in his little volume, "Biblical and Historical Researches," page 92, where he writes:

"The author being interested in the matter, copied the title page of the original work, together with the name of the stenographer and the certificates signed by both Campbell and Rice, certifying to the fact that they examined the report of the discussion and found it correct in every particular; this with the above quotation (referring to the Campbell's statement that, 'Not only Mosheim, Neander, but all the historians, as well as Professor Stuart, trace trine immersion to the times of the apostles') the writer sent to A. P. Spofford, Librarian of Congress, to ascertain its correctness. Here is the reply which explains itself:

"Washington, June 2, 1896.

"In reply to your communication of 1st, I have to advise you that your title page, etc., of the Campbell and Rice Debate corresponds exactly with the edition of 1844, in this library, and so also does the language quoted as on page 258.

"A. P. Spofford, Librarian of Congress."

So there can scarcely be any reasonable doubt that Campbell made the statement ascribed to him, however embarrassing the fact may be to his spiritual children. We do not say that he aimed to support trine immersion. That, of course, was not his purpose. But the truth remains that he bore witness to the ancient origin of trine immersion; that it was trine immersion, indeed, and not merely immersion, that he declared "all the historians" traced to the times of the apostles.